A publisher’s view of writing successful software

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ABSTRACT

This paper gives dilithium Press’s viewpoint of what is required to write successful software today. A discussion of the concepts behind the developmental process should be are covered as well as how that process relates to a publishing company. The basic function of an editorial department is described and the distinction between editorial and marketing in publishing is outlined. The importance of editorial philosophy is talked about and the philosophy of dilithium Press is explained in detail. After describing the editorial philosophy, I give an overview of the type of products dilithium Press is looking for. Finally, the editorial process of submissions, evaluation and development is covered.

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So you want to write software that sells? Well, first let's talk about the meaning of write and software. When I use the word write, I'm not talking about the actual coding of the program. That is one of the last steps you should perform. A more appropriate word, or first step, is design. In the development of software, there are many decisions to be made on the road to success—all before the coding ever begins. As an author you must view your program, whether it is finished or nearly finished, as changeable, not as fixed. The editorial process, which will be discussed later, necessitates that at least some minor changes be made; and in many instances major changes are needed to market your program successfully. These suggestions for the changes can be frustrating to you as an author if you are unwilling to respond to them. If, on the other hand, you view your software as a changeable product, the process of revising your program is mentally much easier. However, before we delve into the editorial process let me first give you an overview of what an editorial department does; what our software editorial philosophy is at dilithium Press; and, in general terms, what type of programs we are looking for.

The editorial function in publishing serves the same purpose as research and development in manufacturing, with one exception. Besides defining the markets, anticipating what will sell, and developing the ideas to satisfy those markets, editors work with authors who have submitted a proposal. However, knowing what will sell and why is not enough to insure sales. The development of the defined markets is just as important as the defining of those markets. This is where an aggressive marketing department comes into play. Marketing must know where and how to sell the software.

If knowing what will sell and why is the first step on the journey toward a successful software product, then editorial philosophy is the road map. At dilithium Press, we realize that there hasn't been any serious attempt to make software a true consumer product. We also understand that most people would prefer to try a product before they buy it. This is as true for software as it is for any other consumer product. Our approach to the development and marketing of software is unique in the way we permit this try-before-you-buy concept. Our software package includes both the program itself and a well-structured book that explains how to use the program. The book is also a marketing tool that can be purchased without the program, allowing the consumer to see how the program operates and what it can do. After consumers see the software's capabilities with real-life examples, they can purchase the program separately.

We also know that to be successful we must deliver good-quality products that are strongly supported and fill a variety of needs. With these facts in mind, we've developed our Software Cycle Concept, the core of our software editorial philosophy. The software cycle has four elements. Each of the four elements of the cycle is related to every other element, yet each can stand alone.

Using an application program as an example, we first develop an introductory book that stimulates a demand for the software package. This book introduces a solution to a problem that will either help the individual increase productivity or help the businessperson increase profits. The methods described in the book are related to the use of microcomputers and a specific software product, but the emphasis is on how to solve a particular problem.

Once we have stimulated a demand for the product, the next step in the cycle is to educate and instruct in the use of the software product. This is done by publishing a nontechnical but well-written book that can be either sold separately or packaged with the program. The book begins with an introduction to the concept behind the software program and is followed by a tutorial with numerous screen displays and real-life examples. Next in the book is a comprehensive reference section listing all the program functions, with an explanation of how and when to use each one. Finally, the last part of the book contains a comprehensive glossary and an index.

The third element in our software cycle is to support the sale. We do this by providing a toll-free number and a knowledgeable customer support staff that communicates with the customer on a nontechnical level. We also send product news updates to registered owners, to let them know about enhancements, and product newsletters, offering tips on how to get the most out of the program.

As the product becomes established in the marketplace, the final element is to augment or enhance the product. The enhancements either are add-on products for the original application program or are standalone, yet complementary, products.

Our software cycle is an innovative approach in stimulating and then meeting a demand and in providing a versatile, complementary system of software programs for retailers and consumers alike. The strength of this approach is twofold. First, it gives the retailer a family of products that sell themselves. Second, the consumer has different product levels from which to choose, from a basic book all the way through to a more advanced and sophisticated software product.

Some products, depending on their scope and complexity, do not require or cannot use this full cycle; but the software cycle does serve as a model to define the scope of the research and development that goes into a particular concept. A complex program, say a database management program, will include all the elements of the cycle. A less complex program, such as a recreational program, will at least have a book to instruct in the use of the program. At dilithium Press, we are interested in both programs that are large in scope and those that are less complex. In our current catalogue and in pro-
grams under development, the mix between the two is approximately equal.

With an understanding of what our editorial philosophy is, we can go on to what sort of products we are interested in. But first, let me give a summary of our editorial philosophy by emphasizing that dilithium Press is focusing on the consumer market. This means we are looking for products that have a large, mass-market appeal. We believe that we are not just publishers of software, but rather that we are publishers of information. With that thought in mind, the kind of software, or information, that we are considering is applications that focus on personal productivity, home management, education, recreation, and the “new crop.” Each of these markets if further expanded briefly below.

Personal productivity software consists of spreadsheets, database management, file management, project management, business graphics, word processing, and communications. These are all functions that are necessary to increase productivity and improve the decision-making ability of the individual. Beyond the individual applications of the current crop of personal productivity software is what has been called work station productivity software. Work station software combines all these applications into one system that is networked with other computers.

Home management software consists of programs that can perform much the same function as productivity software. In many instances, the only difference is the complexity of the program. The basic goal of being more productive is much the same. The programs in this category must be creative tools and either truly save time or allow for more informed decision making.

Educational software consists of two categories, the institutional market and the home market. The first category, institutional education, is for the kindergarten through college levels. This type of software needs to be designed with a specific curriculum in mind and must be entertaining as well as educational. The second category is the home education market, the market with by far the most potential. The home products must be family-oriented, entertaining, and educational. These programs need not conform to a particular curriculum, yet they must have a sound educational basis. Also included in the educational category are tutorial programs, which either educate in the use of a particular product or instruct in a particular field of interest.

In the near future, the recreational category promises to deliver some of the most exciting and innovative concepts of the software industry. Future recreational products will not be based on the current arcade style of entertainment software, but rather on the interactive simulations that are now being developed and brought to market. These future products will incorporate a blending of sound, graphics, strategy, and education.

The new crop of software is composed of unique concepts that are just now being imagined by both authors and publishers. Areas such as home and educational robotics, the simple creation of sophisticated art and music by computers, the evolution of the home computer into an extensive resource center of information, and the use of computers for day-to-day, personal communication are just a few of the innovations that will change the way we live, work, play, and think. The foundations for this category of software are being laid today, just as the foundations of the microcomputer revolution were being laid back in 1974.

These are the general markets we are focusing on. However, just because a concept will not fit neatly into any one of the above markets doesn’t mean we’re not interested. If a concept can be developed into a software product with mass-market appeal, we are interested, whether or not the idea can use all of the elements of our software cycle. Besides having mass-market potential, software published by our company must also be easy and intuitive to use, provide a creative solution to a problem, be entertaining and challenging, or allow the innovative use of a computer.

With an understanding of the purpose of an editorial department and of our editorial philosophy, let’s see what the editorial process is. The software editorial process consists of three phases: the submission phase, the evaluation phase, and the development phase. The submission phase consists of two rather different approaches, either the unsolicited proposal or the managed project. The first approach is used when I receive a proposal in the mail. This can be either a design idea or a program. The proposal is carefully examined and reviewed to determine its suitability for our editorial philosophy and marketing plans.

To aid in our examination and review, the proposal needs to contain a description of the major functions and features of the software, emphasizing those that are unique as well as a description of the computer system and language requirements. Next, an analysis of the intended market for the program, with a review of any competitive products currently on the market, is needed, along with a brief description of who will purchase the program and why. Finally, an outline for the book to accompany the program and a biographical sketch of the author should be included, emphasizing any expertise relating to the intended market. Our Authors’ Guide presents this information in more detail.

Another means of developing a product is based on what I will call a managed project: The editorial department at dilithium Press originates the idea. We determine the functions and features, define the targeted market, and create the design specifications. We then work with one or more authors to develop both the book and the software. When the managed-project approach is used to develop a software program, the evaluation process is an integral part of the design and development of the concept.

However, if a submitted proposal fits within our editorial philosophy and has mass-market potential, the next step is the evaluation process. The proposal is carefully evaluated by both dilithium Press editors and our external editors, who review particular projects in their area of expertise for content and then recommend any enhancements. A marketing and sales analysis is performed. This analysis considers different marketing strategies and sales levels to determine the financial considerations of the proposal. If the program is included, we look at the completeness of the program as well as the reliability and the functionality of the software.

Once the evaluation process is completed and a contract is signed, the development process begins. The contract outlines
a description of the items to be delivered as well as a delivery schedule. Agreed-upon enhancements, both minor and major, are incorporated into the design as defined by the contract. Now the first coding (or recoding, as the case may be) begins. The first version of the program will need to be thoroughly tested and the book will need to be edited. The suggestions from testing and copy editing are then incorporated into the final product. This process of coding, testing, and revising may take some time, so the schedule as outlined in the contract must be adhered to.

To test the programs, we go through a two-level review process. The first review, which is done in house, occurs when the manuscript for the book is compared with the program to find any inaccuracies. Then we test the program itself to find any errors or the need for any improvements. After this first level is completed, the program is given back to the author for recoding and revision. Once the in-house testing is completed and the program is almost in final form, the second review takes place. For this second level, the program and the manuscript are sent to people outside the company for a thorough testing in real-life situations. If corrections or improvements are required after this level of testing, the program is given back to the author for the final recoding. Once the program is tested and found to be reliable and accurate and the book is complete, the software package is sent to production. The editorial process is now complete.

Admittedly, the definition of what an editorial department is, what it does, and how that relates to our editorial process is simplified here. What really matters to us is our sound and successful editorial philosophy. As I stated before, editorial philosophy is the road map on the journey to success, and that success is determined by both the publisher who uses that philosophy as a guide and by the efforts of authors who believe in that philosophy and are willing to work hard. If you are one of those authors, welcome!